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Reprieves

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There are creatures of such darkness, such terror, that their very presence is a blight to nature itself. None are as horrible as those that were once part of the cycle of life, beings that had been embraced and beloved of the living Force only to turn their backs on it and betray everything that had believed in them. On Cularin, such a creature now roams the jungles she once called home, stalking prey she cannot be allowed to find.

It was easy, she thought as she glided over the grasses at the foot of the t'chira trees without disturbing a single blade. She truly had become more powerful. The Wyrd were the strongest force in the jungle because they had abandoned their weak, old ways of supplication and grasped the truth. Nature exists only to serve those with the will to force what they want from it.

Was this not true with every other living creature on Cularin, even the pathetic Tarasin themselves? Strong animals kill weaker ones and feast upon them, making themselves even stronger and ensuring survival of their own kind. In this way, the Wyrd survived and grew more powerful with each passing day.

They had suffered losses, surely, but they were not defeated. That further proved their right to dominance. The ancient ways of the Tarasin would soon be swept away, and they would see the power of the Force. She, Kirasha, a mere Human, was swayed, and she was now an utterly devoted servant of the Wyrd; certainly, the Tarasin would understand once their obstacles such as Darianna and the Jedi were destroyed.

Age was handling the first obstruction, and their internecine fighting and foolish war would annihilate the second. Without their misguided efforts, nothing would stop the Wyrd from commanding the entire system and then, someday, the galaxy. How could it not be so?

While age would soon catch up to the doddering Mother of the Hironi, the true leader of the Wyrd had sensed a sharp decline in the power of the Tarasin shamen loyal to Darianna. Kirasha felt pride in receiving the assignment to investigate the cause for the drain in their energies. She hoped to exploit it to deal with the Mother once and for all. If she could have formed tears, Kirasha would have cried over the great honor this mission implied.

However, four days after being assigned this task, Kirasha was closer to weeping with frustration. There was no sign of a ritual even being performed, much less its cause or its purpose. She had circled the Hironi holy sites along with the circles belonging to every tribe not already under the Wyrd's sway. They all seemed either abandoned or infrequently used.

There were an abnormal number of somewhat fresh tracks near the most remote ceremony circle of the Hironi irstat, but there were far too many for a ritual group. Even the weakest student of Tarasin lore knew that the species performed combined rituals only in their distant past; the lore was lost to the current generation.

Still, her tracking skills kept leading her back to the circular mound and its ring of great stones. So here she was, staring into its confines as if the answer were written on the stones but only visible to those who looked long enough. When that failed, now for the fifth time, Kirasha stalked like a lithe jungle cat into the circle and sat down. Though she hated the introspective quiet that came with meditation, she had run out of options and knew better than return to the Wyrd in defeat.

The darkness poured over her like a wave. She was back in her foster home in Hedrett, standing over the bodies of her "replacement family." She did not feel a drop of regret, even for the other children that were so cruel to her. At least, that was what she told herself every time she closed her eyes. Perhaps this frailty was the weakness she was warned about; this was likely the compassion that kept her from achieving the true power she craved. Try as she might, she could never escape their faces in the dark. Their agony... their young, betrayed eyes...

Youth! Her mind seized on that image and started to lead her away from the circle. Though she was not physically moving, Kirasha could feel her muscles straining against the tight leather of her hunting suit as if she were running, almost as if she was trying to escape herself. In her mind's eye, she could see a trail winding through the trees away from the ceremonial site and into the deepest heart of the jungle.

She sat in the center of the standing stones, not moving and with her eyes closed, swaying back and forth as she followed her vision. As she did, a second figure entered the clearing. Also dressed in black and also Human, he moved as silently as a shadow toward her. One hand tightened on a soft silver rod, one gloved finger on a dark button near its leading end. If she had been aware of his presence, Kirasha would have admired his stalking technique.

He watched her, studying the woman intently. There was no doubt she was of the Wyrd; he had fought them often enough to know the signs. He knew what he had to do, but he could not bring her down like a coward. He would at least face her; he would at least give her peace without striking like an assassin. With regret, the man ignited his lightsaber, bathing the nearby stones with a violet glow.

Kirasha remained intent on her vision quest. She could see trees she recognized now, curling branches leading inexorably to only one place in the jungle. The Force was guiding her down the path to the Spirit Tree, the largest tree on all of Cularin. She was completely oblivious to her physical body, the sound of the lightsaber's hum and the threat posed. She was so close to the truth behind the Tarasin's plans, the scheme that was leading them to sacrifice so much of their power. She did not hear the descending wail of the energy blade as it swept toward her neck.

And there it stayed, a few inches from slicing through the defenseless woman's flesh. The man knew he had to do this, had to stop her from

discovering what the Tarasin, Master Lanius, and he were working so hard to accomplish. Hundreds, perhaps thousands of lives were at stake.

But he just could not do it. He could not murder someone, no matter how evil they might be or how important the act.

On the other hand, he told himself, lightsaber thrumming in his grasp, it would be quick. She would not suffer; that was far better than what could be said for the victims of the Wyrd. How many had this one sacrificed in the soul-rending rites of that dark cult? Mercy was better than she deserved; as a Jedi, it was also his duty to save others from those who would abuse the power of the Force. He did not want to do this, but he had to, and he knew it. There was no choice. He raised his weapon to strike again.

And Kirasha saw it. Her gaze was drawn below into a cavern beneath the great tree. Her sight penetrated soil and stone and emerged in a massive chamber. There, she saw them. Dozens, each one with the same eyes as her family so long ago. Afraid, hiding, protected. The warmth! It was a shelter, a welcome like none she had ever known.

No... that was not true. She had known it once. She had known it and turned her back on it. She had been given a second chance at a family, and her resentment at needing anyone or anything shredded her one chance at happiness. It was not their fault. They were never cruel. It had been her. They offered love, the kind of love she could feel in this cave, and she returned only death.

In the light of his saber, the man took one last look at her before performing the execution. He whispered a prayer he did not understand in a language he could not actually speak for her soul. Just as he began to strike, the flickering purple radiance reflected off her face. The light reflected off her -- tears? He forced himself to hold back the killing blow and looked again. She was weeping. The Wyrd adept's cheeks were wet with tears.

She opened her eyes to meet his. She knew he was there and understood exactly what he meant to do. Kirasha nodded once and turned her head to the side, tilting it to reveal the side of her tattooed neck. "Do it," she said, her voice thick with self loathing and regret for so many wasted years.

The Jedi stepped back, shock and bewilderment fighting for space in his ebon eyes. "No. I can't." His finger fell away from the switch on his weapon, and its violet blade vanished instantly. Alone in the clearing with her, he sank to his knees in front of her. As the sky opened up and began to rain, he looked into her eyes. They flashed with every violent bolt of lighting that crashed overhead. "Why?"

Kirasha shook her head. "I do not know." Her voice had a tone that let him know instantly -- she was not answering his question directly. She was talking about her entire life, not just this night. She was lost, utterly adrift in the Force and yet closer to the light than she had ever been in her life. He knew exactly what she was feeling.

And he knew exactly what to do. He rose, shadow-black robes clinging to his body from the downpour and extended his hand. "You saw it, didn't you?"

She nodded mutely. Then, after staring at his hand for a long while, she answered hoarsely, "Would you..." Her eyes were those of someone knowing full well that they were unworthy of being granted the thing they wanted most in life.

He smiled as much as he ever did, perhaps as much as he ever could. "Take you there? Give you a place there?" When she nodded again and lowered her gaze to the pooling mud under his feet, the Jedi reached down and lifted her chin. "Of course. I think that is truly the reason I was drawn here tonight. You belong there."

Kirasha felt a surge of unfamiliar joy burn through her. As she took his hand and they disappeared into the jungle together, she began stripping off everything given to her by the Wyrđ. The past was dead and could never be forgiven, but she could at least enter the future washed clean by the rains of Cularin.